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ABSTRACT

This booklet is designed to serve as a guide for policymakers who want to involve their constituents in community dialogues on education. It contains information about what community dialogue is, why state policymakers should participate, and how to make the most of participation in a community dialogue on education. This booklet is helpful for policymakers who are looking for a different way to connect with their constituents on an important education issue, who are planning to participate in a community dialogue on education and want to know what to expect, and who are considering how to make the most of their participation in future community dialogues on education. While it does not contain specific information about how to organize or facilitate community dialogue programs, it provides information about where to find these resources. (DFR)

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A Policymaker's Guide to Participating in a Community Dialogue on Education

Making the Most of the Connection

ED 446 362

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Who We Are

This booklet was prepared by the Southwest Educational Development Laboratory (SEDL). The information and guidance it contains are based on SEDL's experience as an organizational partner in implementing the program, *Calling the Roll: Study Circles for Better Schools*, and on the findings of SEDL's research on state policymaker participation in the program. *Calling the Roll* was implemented in 15 Arkansas and Oklahoma communities in Fall 1998. It was designed to create an open, non-partisan opportunity for ordinary citizens and their state legislators to communicate. SEDL's goal in studying the *Calling the Roll* program was to learn whether community dialogue offers a feasible way for state policymakers to interact with constituents about education policy-relevant issues.

In addition to students, parents, community members, and educators, twenty state legislators participated in the *Calling the Roll* program. Through interviews and surveys, SEDL gathered information about these legislators' experiences. From these data, we have learned that community dialogue affects policymakers in the following areas:

- Access to information about the public's values and perspectives on education,
- Relationships with constituents, and
- Awareness of the potential for community action towards improving education.

SEDL recognizes and thanks the following key partner organizations for their efforts in coordinating and studying the *Calling the Roll* program: the Study Circles Resource Center in Pomfret, Connecticut; Arkansas Friends for Better Schools (contact the Arkansas School Boards Association); the League of Women Voters of Oklahoma; and the Center for Research on Teaching and Learning (now the Center for Applied Studies in Education) at the University of Arkansas, Little Rock.

Where to Find It

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A Policymaker's Guide to Participating in a Community Dialogue on Education

Making the Most of the **Connection**

Welcome!

This booklet will be helpful to you if you are

- Looking for a different way to connect with your constituents on an important education issue.
- Planning to participate in a community dialogue on education, and you want to know what to expect.
- Considering how you can make the most of your participation in future community dialogues on education.

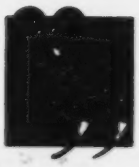
What's in this Guide?

This booklet is designed to serve as a handy guide to participating with constituents in community dialogues on education. It contains information about

- What community dialogue is,
- Why state policymakers should participate, and
- How to make the most of your participation in a community dialogue on education.

What's Not in this Guide?

This booklet does not contain specific information about how to organize or facilitate community dialogue programs. Please see page 8 of this guide for details about where to find these resources.



Connecting with Your Colleagues

Throughout this booklet, we provide advice from policymakers who have participated in community dialogue programs on education.

Connecting with the Process of Community Dialogue

What Is a Community Dialogue on Education?

Community dialogue is a process that allows large numbers of citizens to examine public issues and develop strategies for change. In a community dialogue program, people meet in small groups to dialogue about complex problems in a personal, civil, and collaborative way. Face-to-face discussion and deliberation has a long history in the U.S., reaching as far back as Native American councils and, in the early 1600s, colonial town meetings. Today, civic and nonprofit organizations, interfaith groups, and public agencies across the nation are using community dialogue to

- Define and discuss persistent social and political problems.
- Determine what matters most to a specific community.
- Explore potential solutions and their consequences.
- Take action by implementing selected solutions.

Community dialogues on education create an opportunity for people who care about schools to actively participate in education change by sharing their experiences, concerns, and ideas. Potentially, there are as many different configurations and topics for community dialogues on education as there are communities. The impact of each program also is unique; benefits can range from a greater commitment to public education on the part of community members to actual school- and community-wide problem solving and action. Regardless of their specific make-up or focus, the goals of most community dialogue programs include a desire to yield results— and at the personal level, all participants want their involvement to make a difference.

"Far and away the best way to learn what constituents think is to talk with them. Community dialogue is focused and directed. It lets you home in on what the problems and solutions are."

Oklahoma State Senator

Who Does What in a Community Dialogue Program?

There are five major roles in the community dialogue program process. Here's a quick look at the basic characteristics of each.

Dialogue Program Organizer

Organizers are people or groups that take primary responsibility for planning and coordinating a community dialogue program on education. Their responsibilities include recruiting dialogue facilitators, recorders, and participants. Organizers can be sole sponsors of a program but more typically work collaboratively with others. For example, a school district, the Chamber of Commerce, and the League of Women Voters might jointly sponsor a community dialogue program on education.

Group Facilitator

Facilitators are specially trained to lead a small group dialogue. They typically have skills in interpersonal communication (such as conflict resolution). In a community dialogue on education, the group facilitator takes a neutral role and doesn't express a point of view or provide expert information. It is the facilitator's job to introduce the topics to be discussed, keep the discussion on track and focused, and ensure that group-established ground rules are followed.

Sample dialogue ground rules

- Listen respectfully to others. Seek first to understand, then to be understood.
- Let everyone have a chance to be heard.
- Allow disagreements without personalizing them.
- Be honest about your thoughts and feelings.
- Speak for yourself, not for others.
- Keep confidential anything the group has not agreed to share with others outside the group.

Group Recorder

The recorder's job is to take notes during the small group dialogue. These notes can be used to help the group summarize and report on the main issues. The notes from each small group can be compared and combined to identify major ideas that are common across the entire community dialogue program.

Community Participants

Community participants are ordinary people from all walks of life: parents and non-parents, educators and school board members, business people and retirees, even high school students and other youth. They make a commitment to share their views with other members of the community, many of whom they haven't had a chance to meet. Diversity among participants is very important to the success of the community dialogue process, so most programs are widely advertised to ensure broad-based, community-wide representation.

State Policymaker Participants

State policymaker participants are elected, appointed, or administrative decision makers who have an interest in educational issues and a role in setting state policy about education. These participants may include legislators, state board of education members, other office holders, and state agency staff.

"We've got to know how to spend our dollars as wisely as possible, but we also need broad-based public support from parents and taxpayers who are willing to sacrifice on behalf of better schools in Arkansas."

Arkansas State Senator

Connecting with the Community

Why Should You Participate in Community Dialogues on Education?

As a state policymaker, you play an important role in how well school districts and their communities educate the children of your state. Participating in a community dialogue on education creates a win-win situation for both you and the communities you serve. Students, parents, educators, and other community members have the opportunity to express their experiences, concerns, and ideas. You gain access to points-of-view you might not ordinarily encounter. Most importantly, your participation is the first step toward building new relationships that can support student and school success for years to come. While your philosophical and practical reasons for participating in a community dialogue on education may differ from those of your constituents, the motivations are complementary.

Reasons for Participating

For state policymakers	For community members
To better understand constituents and their needs.	To exercise the rights and responsibilities of citizenship.
To demonstrate a commitment to the communities they serve.	To learn about what matters most to other people in the community.
To activate a new and broader constituency for public education.	To directly influence decisions that will affect local schools.
To build personal credibility and trust in the eyes of the public.	To gain support for solving complicated problems in local schools and the district.
To strengthen existing personal networks for gaining public input about state education problems.	To connect with fellow community members in order to work together on local education issues in the future.

How Does Community Dialogue Add to What You Already Learn from Constituents?

Like apples and oranges, community dialogue is fundamentally different from the other strategies you use to learn what the public believes and wants for education. Community dialogue levels the playing field among participants and provides an opportunity for a different kind of interaction with constituents. Many state policymakers find that community dialogue offers a valuable addition to the other ways they communicate with members of the public.

Public Opinion Polls and Surveys

What it looks like:
Snapshot of public opinion about education at a given moment.

Purpose:
Measures what the public thinks, but not necessarily why they think it.

How community dialogue differs:
Community dialogue is a forum for assessing how the public feels about an issue over an extended period of time and deliberation. The format allows participants to clarify, test, and compare their assumptions and, potentially, change their opinions.

Public Hearings

What it looks like:
Experts and advocates take a personal or political position and present information and opinions to support their particular agenda for education.

Purpose:
Most participants are there to be heard or to listen—but rarely to discuss.

How community dialogue differs:
Community dialogue participants do not attend only to be heard or to listen, but to think together with others from their community and to examine different points of view about the education concerns they share.

Constituent Calls and Visits

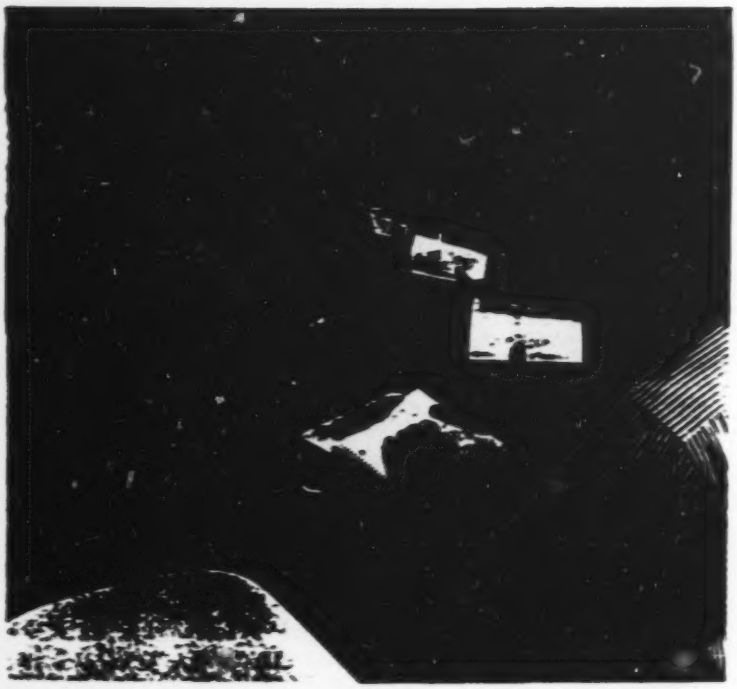
What it looks like:
Members of the public contact their representatives by phone, email, or office visit.

Purpose:
Most of these constituents have a personal request or complaint and are confident in their ability to directly express an opinion to state policymakers.

How community dialogue differs:
While many active constituents are driven by their own individual concerns, most community dialogue participants are likely drawn to the process because of a concern about an issue that affects the community at large.

Making the Most of Your Participation

As a participant in a community dialogue program, there are several junctures where you can make an even greater connection with your constituents.



Before the Program Begins

- Make your commitment to participate as soon as you can, so the organizers will know they can count on you.

- Offer your assistance to program organizers. You may have information or well-established relationships in the community that can help them implement a successful program.

For Example:

Do you have media contacts who will publicize the program? This can result in a better public turnout.

Do you know people in businesses and grant-making organizations who might give the organizers access to resources that are critical to good program coordination?

Are you aware of other groups that are concerned about education? You might introduce the organizers to potential partners who can help with the hard work of coordinating the program and facilitating small group dialogues.

During the Program

- Again, offer your assistance to program organizers. Your presence at a kick-off event or press conference can help raise community awareness and interest in the program.
- If you commit to participate in a dialogue group, make every effort to attend as many sessions as possible. Attending once or twice may not be of much benefit—to you or to the community members in your group.
- Consider making time after each event to talk one-on-one with other participants.

After the Program

- Yet again, offer your assistance to program organizers. Participate in follow-up events they plan. Speaking at an end-of-program celebration event, attending an action forum, or participating in a debriefing session are important ways to help this active citizen group take steps toward creating future programs of effective community engagement.
- Write a feature article for the local newspaper describing your experiences in the community dialogue program.
- Keep in touch, especially with those dialogue participants who can serve as citizen advisors to you in the future.

"The best part of it was the civility. We could differ on our opinions and no one would get upset. Everybody was open to hearing what each person had to say . . . everybody knew that they were there to try to accomplish something."

Oklahoma State Representative

Additional Resources

Materials, training, and technical assistance on how to organize and facilitate community dialogue are available from the following organizations and programs.

Community-wide Study Circle Programs

A process refined by the Study Circles Resource Center, a non-profit organization committed to helping communities bring people together into democratic, face-to-face dialogue and action on critical public issues. SCRC provides program organization advice, materials, training, and technical assistance.

Study Circles Resource Center
P. O. Box 203, Route 169
Pomfret, CT 06258
Phone: (860) 928-2616
email: scrc@studycircles.org
http://www.studycircles.org/

National Issues Forums

A dialogue process developed and supported by the National Issues Forums Institute, a nationwide network of education and community organizations dedicated to public deliberation about social issues of nation-wide concern. NIFI offers guidance in facilitating the NIF process, materials, and training.

National Issues Forums Institute
Phone: 1-800-433-7834
http://www.nifi.org/

Program for Community Problem Solving

A program of the National Civic League, a 106-year-old nonpartisan, nonprofit organization dedicated to strengthening citizen democracy. The League offers information, training, and technical assistance.

National Civic League (Attn: PCPS)
1319 F Street NW, #204
Washington, DC 20004
Phone: (202) 783-2961
http://www.ncl.org/NCL/pcps.htm

Public School Forums

A collaboration among Phi Delta Kappa International, the Center on Education Policy, and the National PTA to encourage and support community forums for improving education. PDK provides materials and technical assistance.

PDK International Center for Professional Development & Services
P.O. Box 789
Bloomington, IN 47402-0789
Phone: 1-800-766-1156
email: cpds@pdkintl.org
http://www.pdkintl.org/adv/forums.htm

Deliberative Community Dialogue

Southwest Educational Development Laboratory (SEDL) has an array of materials that provide information on how community dialogue can help schools, communities, and policymakers connect with each other on issues critical to the success of public education:

- *Insights on Education Policy, Practice, and Research* (series of policy briefs)
- *Calling the Roll: Study Circles for Better Schools* (videotape)
- *Public Deliberation: A Tool for Connecting School Reform and Diversity* (paper)
- *Arkansas and Oklahoma Education Resource Guides* (models for providing education data and information to participants in community dialogue programs).

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